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Negotiating the Passage beyond a Full Span of Life: Old Age Rituals among the Newars

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Among the rich heritage of medieval forms of Tantric Buddhism and Hinduism surviving among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley is a unique series of elaborate old age rituals that are performed upon the attainment of a particular age. Drawing upon the vocabulary of planetary appeasement and other birthday rituals of life-cycle sacraments and of dhāraṇī practice, they serve to protect and sanctify the celebrants and prolong their life. After offering a comprehensive overview of these rituals that registers local variations, this paper probes into their origins and function and, in the process, pays particular attention to the intricate ways in which the Buddhist and Hindu versions of these ceremonies relate to each other.

Keywords: Buddhism; Hinduism; Nepal; life-cycle rituals; birthday rituals; planetary deities

Introduction

The Newars of the Kathmandu Valley observe the principal rites of passage (*saṃskāra*) of the Brahmanical tradition in either a Hindu or Buddhist ritual framework. This ‘parallelism’ (as Siegfried Lienhard has called it)¹ includes not only the standard *saṃskāras* performed from birth up to marriage,² but also encompasses funerary practices, including the *śrāddha* rituals of ancestral worship, which Newar Buddhists also observe.³ While the Newars perform largely the same life-cycle rites as has been customary in much of India until the recent past, there are also noteworthy differences. I would like to turn, in this paper, to a particular departure from the Brahmanical model, namely the creation of additional *saṃskāras* that, even while related to and drawing upon Brahmanical practice, are peculiar to the Newar tradition and not found among the standard life-cycle rites set forth in the *gr̥hyasūtras* or recorded in

¹ Siegfried Lienhard, ‘Religionssynkretismus in Nepal’, in Heinz Bechert (ed.), *Buddhism in Ceylon and Studies on Religious Syncretism in Buddhist Countries: Report on a Symposium in Göttingen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), pp. 146–77.

² An important exception to the parallelism identified by Lienhard is the boyhood initiation for hereditary monks. Instead of undergoing the *upanayana*, these boys are ordained as monks, a status they keep for three days before disrobing. However, the transformation of the ordination ritual into a rite of passage reflects the influence of the *upanayana*, both in content and form. For details, see Alexander von Rospatt, ‘The Transformation of the Monastic Ordination (*Pravrajyā*) into a Rite of Passage in Newar Buddhism’, in Jörg Gengnagel, U. Hüsken and S. Raman (eds), *Words and Deeds: Hindu and Buddhist Rituals in South Asia* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), pp. 199–234.

³ See Todd T. Lewis, ‘A Modern Guide for Mahāyāna Buddhist Life-Cycle Rites: The Nepāl Jana Jivan Kriyā Paddhati’, in *Indo-Iranian Journal*, Vol. 37, no. 1 (1994), pp. 1–46; and David Gellner, *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest: Newar Buddhism and Its Hierarchy of Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 197–213.

such studies as Rajbali Pandey's *Hindu Samskāras. Socio-Religious Study of the Hindu Sacraments*.⁴ This deserves our attention as a poignant example of how a local tradition (which, while situated itself on the periphery of the subcontinent, has always been beholden to the great centres of Brahmanical culture on the Gangetic plain) may engineer change and innovation within the very domain of that culture, using the vocabulary of Brahmanical ritualism with Sanskrit as its language. More precisely, I would like to turn to the *samskāra*-like series of old age rituals (known in Newari as *ḡyā jaṃko*, a term that allows for different spellings) that are performed among the Newars when one has reached a particular advanced age, namely 77 years, 7 months, 7 days, 7 *ghaṭis* (of 24 minutes each) and 7 *palas* (of 24 seconds each), or 88 years, 8 months, 8 days, etc., or 99 years, 9 months, 9 days, etc., or, according to some accounts, 110 years, 10 months, 10 days, etc., or when the elder 'sees the thousandth full moon', that is, when he or she becomes 1,000 months old, which happens between 81 and 84 years of age, depending on how one takes account of intercalary months. This is to supplement the studies of other life-cycle rituals among the Newars, and particularly the treatment of the other prominent *samskāras* that were created in the Newar fold, namely the marriage rite of *ihi* performed for pre-pubescent girls.⁵

The old age ceremonies are among the most complex non-public rituals the Newars perform. Their preparation can span several months and their actual performance continues over several days. They entail elaborate rituals of protection and deification, including a subsequent procession, where the celebrants are conveyed around the town in a chariot or palanquin. These rituals may also subsume such complex rites as elaborate *maṇḍala* worship, the consecration of an icon, or the principal childhood rite of passage for girls, the abovementioned *ihi* (see n. 5) and, occasionally, also the boyhood initiation (*upanayana*). The old age rituals involve not only the family, their relatives, friends and the local community, but also many professionals such as the officiating priests, Brahmans who act as recipients of particular ritual presents (*dāna*), musicians who accompany the ritual performance and procession, potters who prepare the ritual vessels, sweetmeat makers who produce special pastries, carpenters who fashion the wooden chariots or palanquins, and *citrakārs* who paint these conveyances, pots and other ritual items and who may also execute commemorative scroll paintings serving as the central icon for the ritual.

⁴ Rajbali Pandey, *Hindu Samskāras. Socio-Religious Study of the Hindu Sacraments* (Banaras: Vikrama Publications, 1949). See also Mahamahopadhyaya P.V. Kane's monumental *History of Dharmaśāstra: Ancient and Mediaeval Religious and Civil Law in India* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1930–53).

⁵ The *ihi* rite revolves around the ritualised gifting of one's daughter (*kanyādāna*), but there is no human recipient (hence, the term 'mock marriage' is sometimes used in anthropological literature); rather, the girl's groom is typically understood to be a deity, in a Hindu context normally Skanda. Assuming the sacralising function of the Brahmanical wedding ritual, the *ihi* serves as a life-cycle rite of initiation, turning the girls into full-fledged members of their caste, just as the *upanayana* initiation transforms boys ritually speaking into adult men. Thanks to an important essay by Michael Allen, which has complemented his groundbreaking research on the cult of Kumāri, the *ihi* ritual is reasonably well known. See Michael Allen, 'Girls' Pre-Puberty Rites', Chap. 6, in his *The Cult of Kumari: Virgin Worship in Nepal* (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, rev. ed., 1996). For more recent treatments of the *ihi*, see Niels Gutschow, Axel Michaels and Christian Bau, *Growing Up: Hindu and Buddhist Initiation Rituals among Newar Children in Bhaktapur, Nepal* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008); and Alexander von Rospatt, 'Remarks on the Consecration Ceremony in Kuladatta's *Kriyāsamgrahapañjikā* and its Development in Newar Buddhism', in Astrid and Christof Zotter (eds), *Hindu and Buddhist Initiations in Nepal and India* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), pp. 238–45. More importantly, Christoph Emmrich has researched the *ihi* and the *bārāḡ* ritual (a further rite of passage that negotiates the first onset of menstruation) for some years and has prepared an as-yet unpublished monograph dedicated to this topic.

Despite the importance of the old age rituals in the Newar life-cycle, they have only been treated in passing by a few Western academics.⁶ More attention has been paid to these rituals in the writings of some local scholars in Newari, though this material tends to be descriptive, typically offering little more than the gist of particular ritual handbooks.⁷ None of these studies takes into account the breadth of the ritual literature, which comprises more than one hundred manuscripts microfilmed by the Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project (most of them written in a mix of Newari and Sanskrit that is characteristic of this literature), uncounted handwritten manuals in the private possession of priests and in other collections not accessed by this project, a small but growing number of recently published printed handbooks, and related Sanskrit texts from beyond the Newar tradition. To give an example for the importance of this literature, the oldest ritual handbook known to me is a palm leaf manuscript that dates back to 499 Nepāla samvat (1379 CE). As such, it is not only the oldest textual source of the old age rituals (I know of), but also one of the very earliest literary witnesses to Newari. A comprehensive study of the old age rituals requires a survey of these literary sources, including a close study of some select and representative texts. It also requires detailed ethnographic fieldwork that documents the considerable variety in both Hindu and Buddhist practice and, to this end, registers diverging local traditions and differences in the customs of castes. As historical witness, such a study also needs to take into account the scroll paintings that were prepared on the occasion of specific performances—some of them magnificently executed and dating back to the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries, and now housed in museums and private art collections in various parts of the world.⁸ I have begun with such a study some time ago, and currently work on a monograph that draws together the results of my extensive fieldwork and includes materials for further study, such as the edition and translation of ritual manuals, edited video footage and stills that capture some of the variety and change in practice, as well as reproductions of the aforementioned scroll paintings.

⁶ Most important among these is Marianna Kropf, 'Rituelle Traditionen der Planetengottheiten (Navagraha) im Kathmandual. Strukturen–Praktiken–Weltbilder', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Heidelberg, 2005, pp. 270–4 [<http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/5897/2/ProzessHeidok.pdf>, accessed 19 Oct. 2013]. I myself have offered a first assessment in 'Der nahende Tod. Altersrituale bei den Newars (Approaching Death. Old Age Rituals among the Newars)', in Jan Assmann, Franz Maciejewski and Axel Michaels (eds), *Der Abschied von den Toten. Trauerrituale im Kulturvergleich* [Farewell to the Dead: A Crosscultural Study of Rituals of Mourning] (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2005, rpr. 2007), pp. 199–222. The present paper has been authored on a much broader material basis; it incorporates new research results and offers a thorough reassessment, which includes a better informed overview and a more nuanced treatment of the function and origins of the old age rituals than presented in my earlier, more provisional paper. I am deeply indebted to Iain Sinclair, who has not only been a meticulous editor, but also contributed substantially to this paper with his detailed feedback and learned input, including pointing me towards pertinent materials I was not aware of.

⁷ The most important local publication for the Buddhist version of old age rituals is a booklet reproducing a ritual manual for the *bhīmarathārohaṇa* and the two subsequent *jamkos*, as transmitted by Dharmaratna Vajrācārya in 2009. See Dharmaratna Vajrācārya and Madan Sena Vajrācārya (ed.), *Bhīma, deva va mahārathārohaṇa pūjāvaidhikriyā* (Kathmandu: Siddhi Dharmahaṛṣa Dhārmika Saṃrakṣaṇa Saṃsthā, 2009). The booklet also provides a useful introduction to the old age rituals (pp. 'ca'–'tha'). Two Newar treatises on life-cycle rituals that include the old age rituals have been translated into English, namely a brief summary by Badriratna and Ratnakāji Vajrācārya, in Lewis, 'A Modern Guide for Mahāyāna Buddhist Life-Cycle Rites'; and a monograph by Āśākāzi Bajrācārya, the long-time collaborator of Michael Allen. See Āśākāzi Bajrācārya (trans.), *The Daśakarma Vidhi: Fundamental Knowledge on Traditional Customs of Ten Rites of Passage amongst the Buddhist Newars* (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 2010).

⁸ Cf. Pratapaditya Pal, 'The Bhīmaratha Rite and Nepali Art', in *Oriental Art*, Vol. 23, no. 2 (1977), pp. 176–89; and Anne Vergati, 'Image et rituel: A propos des peintures bouddhiques népalaises', in *Arts Asiatiques*, Vol. 54 (1999), pp. 33–43.

Here, I restrict myself to a brief overview of the old age rituals that touches upon their historical background and addresses the question of their function and origins. My account is grounded in a survey of ritual handbooks and related textual materials, and informed by the nearly twenty performances of different kinds of old age rituals in the Buddhist and Hindu fold that I have documented between 1998 and 2009 in different locations and among different communities. I engage with the old age rituals as a prominent example of the local creation of a *samskāra*-style ritual that expands upon the Brahmanical paradigm. This ‘creation’ has been a complex process that was embraced in both the Hindu and Buddhist milieu. Paying particular attention to this aspect, I will consider Brahmanical precursors and parallels and argue that the Buddhist sequence of old age rituals is also grounded in the Tantric cult of *dhāraṇī* goddesses. This, I hope, will also serve as a small contribution to the much larger question of how the Buddhist and Hindu ritual traditions are related and have influenced each other.

In pursuing this theme, I privilege the perspective of the ritual specialists who have authored (and continue to author) the ritual manuals I studied and who perform these rituals as family priests (*purohita*), namely the Rājopādhyāya Brahmins on the one side, and the Buddhist Tantric priests, the Vajrācāryas, on the other side. These priests stand in distinct ritual traditions, namely in Śaivite Śāktism and in Vajrayāna Buddhism. They draw upon distinct corpuses of scripture and exegetical literature, employ different ritual processes, invoke different deities, recite different mantras, and so on. Thus, the Rājopādhyāyas typically use the Vājasaneyi Mādhyandina recension of the *Śukla Yajurveda* for the rituals’ liturgical elements, whereas the Vajrācāryas perform these rites in a Buddhist idiom that involves the invocation of the five Buddhas of the Yoga Tantras. The Hindu and Buddhist priests are keenly aware of all these differences and have unmistakably distinct religious identities—unlike many (but not all of) their clients. When I differentiate in this paper between ‘Hindu’ and ‘Buddhist’, I do so with reference to the religious specialists and their textual and ritual traditions, and not with regard to their clients with their often much less clearly formed religious identities.

Old Age Rituals as Birthday Rituals and Life-Cycle Sacraments

An obvious starting point for treating the *jyā jamko* ceremonies is their correspondence to Indian birthday rituals. Though not marking the completion of a year’s life, they are also occasioned by the completion of a specific life span and entail the same set of apotropaic rites of appeasement (*śānti*) called for by the passage beyond.⁹ Accordingly, the planetary deities, the so-called *navagrahas*, are propitiated together with the stellar constellation under which the elder was born, the *janma-nakṣatra*. The *navagrahas* are the seven planets identified with the weekdays, the sun, the moon, Maṅgala (= Mars), Budha (= Mercury), Bṛhaspati (= Jupiter), Śukra (= Venus), and Śani (= Saturn), as well as Rāhu, which is identified with solar and lunar eclipses, and Ketu, a less certain cosmic phenomenon often associated with cosmic light such as that emanating from shooting stars, but, in conjunction with Rāhu, also identified as the south lunar node. This propitiation serves to neutralise the harmful effect the planets might have on the celebrant in the new span of life now beginning. Moreover, Newar Hindus—and certain segments of the Buddhists of Patan on the occasion of their third *jyā jamko* (see below)—propitiate the eight Hindu deities of longevity, the *aṣṭaciraṃjivins*, namely Aśvatthāman, Bali, Vyāsa, Hanumāna, Vibhiṣaṇa, Kṛpa, Paraśurāma and Mārkaṇḍa,

⁹ See Marko Geslani, ‘The Ritual Culture of Appeasement: Śānti Rites in Post-Vedic Sources’, unpublished PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2011, UMI no. 3467902 [http://gradworks.umi.com/3467902.pdf, accessed 6 Dec. 2013].

so as to share in their longevity and secure long life and freedom from disease (*ārogya*) for the celebrant. The propitiation of the *navagrahas* and of the *aṣṭaciraṃjīvins* is the principal element of the Indic birthday ritual. It is to effect ‘many happy returns’ and, accordingly, the rite is known in Sanskrit as *varṣavardhana*, that is, ‘increase in years’.

However, these parallels with birthday rituals only speak to one aspect of the old age ceremonies—many more actions are performed than the mentioned rites of appeasement (*śānti*) and propitiation. The elders are ritually washed and purified with blessed water, they perform ritual acts attested already in the *smārta* literature of Brahmanical Hinduism, such as stepping on a stone in order to overcome obstacles and be imbued with its steadfastness, then taking the seven sacred steps of Brahmanical Hinduism, and finally circumambulating the holy fire. They don new clothes and, if male, have a turban draped around their head; they are adorned with particular earrings (*punhāy cā*) and, in some cases, have a third eye applied to their forehead in the way of gods (see [Figure 1](#)). If the celebrant is a widow, she loses her inauspicious character, and she may, for the first time since the death of her husband, wear golden finery, and use red *ṭikā* powder in order to mark her forehead and draw a line along the parting in her hair. The celebrants then mount the chariot or palanquin (*ratha-ārohaṇa*) prepared for the occasion, thereby enacting their deification. Seated on the chariot, the elders are now worshipped by their relatives who pour water from a conch shell onto their feet (*pādārgha*) and bow to them with their forehead (see [Figure 2](#)). The water is regarded as



FIGURE 1. Kṛṣṇabhakta and Tirthamāyā Nakaḥmi from Kathmandu on the occasion of their *bhīmarathārohaṇa*, celebrated on 10 October 2003. Upon the conclusion of their ritual bath, they donned new clothes. As a sign of their deification, their foreheads are marked with the third eye. The wife wears a wedding sari and golden ornaments. The turban worn by the husband is used by Newars only on ritual occasions as a sign of honour.

Source: Author's photograph.



FIGURE 2. On the occasion of his third *jyā jamko* , celebrated in August 2005, Dharmaratna Vajracarya from Bu Bāhā is seated on the *ratha* and worshipped by his daughter-in-law after she has poured an offering of water from a conch shell onto his feet (*pādārgha*), and by her husband, Kājiratna, who can be seen seated close by.

Source: Author's photograph.

sanctified (*prasāda*) by the contact with the elders' feet (and not as polluted, as it normally would be) and, accordingly, the family members sprinkle it over their bodies and moisten their lips with it. Indicative of their newly assumed divine status, the elders are now held to be charged with particular power that allows them to effectively bless their family members as they venerate them (and supposedly to curse them if not treated with due respect). After the elders have thus been worshipped like deities, they are conveyed in a procession around town pulled in their chariot or carried in their palanquin (see Figure 3). While this procession may also serve to offer the elders the opportunity to worship at local shrines just as happens in the context of other *saṃskāras* , notably the *upanayana* and infant initiation (*macā jamko*), the main purpose is to enact their deification in public by transporting them in the same way deities are on the occasion of their festivals. It is these rites of sanctification that stand in the foreground of the old age rituals. Accordingly, married couples perform the old age ceremonies in unison, irrespective of the wife's age, in contradistinction to ordinary birthday rituals, which (also among the Newars) are celebrated separately by spouses on the day of their respective anniversary. (Only widowed or unmarried women celebrate the *jyā jamko* rituals when they themselves reach the age in question.)

Though the old age rituals express the deification of the celebrants in particularly striking terms, they are yet, in this regard, similar to the standard *saṃskāras* , which also involve



FIGURE 3. Upon conclusion of the principal rituals, Dharmaratna Vajrācārya (cp. Figure 2) is conveyed in a procession around Bu Bāhā and its vicinity. His cart is pulled by his great-grandchildren.

Source: Author's photograph.

raising the subjects undergoing them onto a higher plane of existence, where they are assimilated with the gods. Expressing this continuity, sources of both Hindu and Buddhist provenance refer sometimes to the *jyā jaṃko* rituals (in Sanskrit) as 'initiation of the old' (*vr̥ddha-upanayana*), thereby alluding to the *saṃskāra* par excellence, the boyhood initiation. Moreover, the Newar term *jaṃko* equates this ritual with another prominent sacrament, namely the *macā jaṃko*. This rite is performed for infants (*macā*) who are fed rice and solid food for the first time, hence the Sanskrit equivalent term *annaprāśana*. It is the most important rite of early childhood and, similarly to the *jyā jaṃko*, serves to purify and sacralise the children. The designation of the old age ceremonies as *upanayana* or *jaṃko* is fitting insofar as they include ritual sequences of sacralisation and deification characteristic of the *saṃskāras*, and insofar as they are associated with a particular stage in the life-cycle. Even so, they are not life-cycle rites of passage in the same sense as the standard *saṃskāras* are and, tellingly, they are typically treated apart from them in the ritual literature, just as mortuary and post-mortuary rituals are not dealt with in direct unison with the other *saṃskāras*. For, whereas *saṃskāras* typically translate into a permanent change in social status—the *upanayana* transforms boys into adult men, the wedding transports the bride from her maternal to her spouse's family, etc.—the deification of the celebrants within the parameters of the old age ceremonies only transforms the celebrants temporally within the parameters of the ritual and not beyond. Consequently, the mentioned change in the status of widows is confined to the duration of the old age ceremony and the strictures of widowhood apply again afterwards, including the injunction not to wear red garments and gold finery.

Because the old age rituals do not effect a lasting change in social status, their performance is—unlike in the case of the principal rites of passage—not compulsory, but a matter of choice and typically dependent upon circumstances, though some of my interlocutors have insisted that at least a *sagun* should be presented as a protective good luck offering to the elder reaching the critical age in question. Moreover, while *saṃskāras* cannot be repeated, the old age rituals come in a series that may be celebrated one after another as one progresses in old age. In this, these rituals correspond to birthday celebrations with their annual recurrence. There is, however, one way in which the *jyā jamkos* can be viewed as genuine rites of passage. They mark the time when the celebrant has lived a full span of life and, accordingly, is threatened by the exhaustion of his or her life force. The rites protect the celebrant and help him or her negotiate the precarious passage beyond this point. As will be explained below, the reckoning of what constitutes a full span of life varies from *jamko* to *jamko*, and it is because of this variation that there are several *jamkos*.

An Overview of the *Bhīmarathārohaṇa* and the Subsequent Old Age Rituals

The foregoing sketch is a generic summary that does not capture the considerable variety between the different *jamkos*, between practice in the Hindu and Buddhist folds, and between the local traditions of Kathmandu and Patan (and the other towns of the Valley). In what follows, I go into more detail, dealing with the individual *jamkos*. However, for want of space, my description here needs to summarise and generalise practice and cannot do justice to the startling variety encountered on the ground, a theme I reserve for the monograph under preparation.

The Sanskrit term used for the designation of all *jamkos* but the one of the thousand moons¹⁰ is *rathārohaṇa*, which means ‘mounting of the chariot’. It is used in combination with a qualifying noun, namely *bhīma-*, *deva-*, *mahā-* or *mahādeva-*, depending upon the *jamko* in question. This designation points to the mounting of the chariot or palanquin—the term *ratha* here subsumes both conveyances—as the pivotal moment in the ritual when the elders enact their deification. Accordingly, it is only while seated on the *ratha* that their children and relatives worship their feet with water (*pādārgha*).

The first *jamko*, celebrated at 77 years, 7 months and 7 days, is called *bhīmarathārohaṇa* or simply *bhīmaratha*. This *jamko* focuses in both its Hindu and Buddhist versions on the appeasement of the nine planetary deities (*graha*). Accordingly, the *ratha* is identified with the sun, which is worshipped as the first and foremost of the *graha* deities, and, in a *maṇḍala* configuration, assumes centre place with the remaining eight *grahas* surrounding it, a point to which I will return in more detail below. Hence, the *ratha* is decorated with horses, which, also according to Indian mythology, pull the chariot of the sun. These horses may be carved out of wood and attached to the *ratha* or simply be drawn on paper banners which are tied to the *ratha*.

In a Buddhist setting, the performance of the *bhīmarathārohaṇa* includes the establishment of new images and the elaborate series of consecration rites (*pratiṣṭhā*) accompanying this. The performance of these rituals is structured around the standard ten life-cycle rites of passage, the *daśa saṃskāras*,¹¹ and interwoven with the *jamko* ceremony so as to form an integral part of it. In conjunction with the marriage rituals performed for the icons, there is

¹⁰ Occasionally, the term *candrarathārohaṇa* is also encountered, but this is obviously a secondary formation with little traction.

¹¹ Cf. von Rospatt, ‘Remarks on the Consecration Ceremony in Kuladatta’s *Kriyāsaṃgrahaṇajikā* and Its Development in Newar Buddhism’, in Astrid and Christof Zotter (eds), *Hindu and Buddhist Initiations in Nepal and India* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), pp. 199–262.

typically a group of girls—in conversations, a quorum of at least five is often mentioned as ideal—who undergo their *ihī* rite of passage (see n. 5) in parallel with the icon’s wedding rites. The rites of sanctification performed for the *ihī* girls and for the icon (as part of its wedding) are performed likewise for the female elder. This ties closely together the three principal strands of ritual activity, viz. the icon consecration, the *ihī* rite of passage for the girls, and the *jamko* sanctification of the elder. As a result, the *jamko* ritual is not merely a life-cycle ritual for the celebrating elders. Rather, it also functions as an occasion for the performance of the principal childhood rite of passage for girls—and sometimes also for boys, who, on this occasion, may undergo their *kaytā pūjā*, the initiatory rite of passage corresponding to the Brahmanical *upanayana* ritual and, hence, equivalent in function to the *ihī*. These girls and boys are typically recruited from among the celebrants’ great-grandchildren, though other children may also be included. Thus the *bhīmarathārohaṇa* is a major family festival that unites several generations, though the elders are unmistakably the principal celebrants.

This aspect of the *bhīmarathārohaṇa* is particularly prominent among the Buddhists of Kathmandu, who place special emphasis on the consecration rituals for which they fashion a special scroll painting (*paubhāḥ*) with an iconography unique to the *bhīmarathārohaṇa*. The central object is a *stūpa* with the goddess Uṣṇīṣavijayā in the dome. Often, the goddesses Vasudhārā and Grahamātrkā are situated below her in the lower sections of the *stūpa* (see Figure 4). The principal icon is not the *stūpa* itself, but Uṣṇīṣavijayā, whose standard iconography requires her depiction within a *stūpa*.¹² As we will see below, Vasudhārā and Uṣṇīṣavijayā are the principal deities of the second and third *jamkos*. As for the mother goddess, Grahamātrkā, befitting the *bhīmarathārohaṇa*, with its focus on the sun and the other planetary deities, she represents those deities.¹³ At the bottom of the *paubhāḥ*, there are normally two separate registers that serve to commemorate the celebration of the *bhīmarathārohaṇa*. The upper register depicts principal scenes of the ritual, typically the bathing of the elders, their veneration by their kin, their procession in chariots (*rathayātrā*) as well as the performance of the fire ritual. The register below these scenes depicts the rite’s sponsors (*yajamāna* or *dānapati*), that is, the sons and grandsons of the celebrants, including their wives, children and grandchildren, separated according to gender. In this donor register, the celebrants themselves are typically not depicted because the ritual is performed for them and, hence, they are not treated as sponsors who have instigated and sponsored its performance. At the very bottom, there is a commemorative inscription recording the date and the names of the celebrated elder(s) and of their kin sponsoring the rite. In addition to the uncounted *paubhāḥs* kept and worshipped by the Buddhists of Kathmandu in their private *pūjā* chambers, there is a considerable number of such scroll paintings, some of them magnificently executed and dating back to the Malla era, surviving in art collections around the world. Besides those *paubhāḥs* with a *stūpa* that have Uṣṇīṣavijayā at their centre, there are a few scroll paintings from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which depict a *Navagraha-maṇḍala* with either the moon or the sun at their centres. Occasionally these

¹² See, for instance, *sādhana* 191 or 211 of Benoytosh Bhattacharya (ed.), *Sāadhanamālā* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1925).

¹³ Gudrun Bühnemann’s article, ‘Tantric Deities in an Illustrated Dhāraṇī Manuscript’, provides a useful review of iconographic studies pertaining to Uṣṇīṣavijayā, Vasudhārā and Grahamātrkā. See Gudrun Bühnemann, ‘Tantric Deities in an Illustrated Dhāraṇī Manuscript’, in Adalbert J. Gail, Gerd J.R. Mevissen and Richard Salomon (eds), *Script and Image: Papers on Art and Epigraphy (Papers of the 12th World Sanskrit Conference held in Helsinki, Finland, 13–18 July, 2003, Volume 11.1)* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2006), pp. 29–64. It includes mention of Gerd Mevissen’s extensive work on Grahamātrkā, such as his study of early miniature depictions from illuminated manuscripts and book covers. See Gerd Mevissen, ‘Die früheste Darstellung der Grahamātrkā. Buchmalerei aus Nepal’, in *Indo-Asiatische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 8 (2004), pp. 47–62.



FIGURE 4. *Paubhāḥ* painted by Sarvajña Ratna Vajracharya of Kathmandu prepared on the occasion of Kṛṣṇabhakta and Tīrthamāyā Nakaḥmi's *ḥyā jaṃko* (see Figure 1). Uṣṇīṣavijayā is depicted inside the dome, and Vasudhārā and Grahamāṭṛkā below her. Uṣṇīṣavijayā is also invoked together with the Buddha at the beginning of the commemorative inscription at the bottom (*oṃ namo buddhāya, oṃ namo uṣṇīṣavijayā* [!]). Moreover, the icon as a whole was named 'Uṣṇīṣavijayā' during the name-giving ceremony (*nāmakaraṇa*) performed as part of the consecration rites. The procession with the celebrants is shown below the *stūpa* and above the inscription. The painting, which is fitted into a modern frame, is shown in the course of its consecration as a sacred icon, hence the flower garland and other ritual artefacts attached to it. Source: Author's photograph.

paintings also depict the Pañcarakṣās. I suspect that at least in some cases, these *paubhāḥs* have been painted on the occasion of a first or second *jamko*, dedicated respectively to the sun and the moon. Because of the accompanying inscription commemorating the performance of a *bhīmaratha* ceremony,¹⁴ we know this to be so in the case of the oldest such painting, a sun *maṇḍala*, which is preserved in the Zimmermann Family Collection, New York, and probably dates to 1379 CE, curiously the same year from which our oldest (abovementioned) textual witness to the old age rituals hails, a time coinciding with the pacification of the historical Nepal under Jayasthiti Malla, and the era of cultural renewal this ushered in.¹⁵

The *bhīmarathārohaṇa* is far more prominent than any of the other *jamkos* described in the following paragraphs. This not only follows from the biological fact that many elders who live to 77 do not live on to see their next *jamko*. Rather, among those who reach more advanced ages, the performance of the subsequent *jamkos* tends to be far less common. Indeed, it seems that nowadays only the Buddhists of Patan perform all *jamkos*, although even they normally miss out on the rituals dedicated to Vasudhārā as explained below. By contrast, other Newars commonly only celebrate the *bhīmarathārohaṇa* ritual properly, while they observe the subsequent *jamkos*, if at all, only in a much reduced form. However, the pertinent ritual literature prescribes the performance of subsequent *jamkos* irrespective of location for Hindu and Buddhist Newars alike. Hence, the following sketch follows this literature and the practice I observed among the Buddhists of Patan (more precisely, among communities attached to the Kvā Bāhā, Bu Bāhā, Bhimche Bāhā, Guji Bāhā or Uku Bāhā, or served by priests from those monasteries).

The old age ritual following upon the *bhīmarathārohaṇa* is dedicated to the moon and celebrated when the elder sees the thousandth full moon (*sahasra-candra-darśana*), sometime between 81 and 84 years of age depending upon the mode of computation when dealing with the intercalary months that align the lunar with the solar calendar. The Buddhists of Patan observe this ritual, while those of Kathmandu do not. Before the full moon rises, the celebrants worship the moon by making offerings to the divine personifications of the sixteen lunar digits (*kalā*), that is, the sixteen phases it assumes in a fortnight. For this, the sixteen digit deities are arranged in a *maṇḍala* dedicated to the moon (see Figure 5). When the new full moon has risen, it is, moreover, propitiated by the elders. As they take *darśan* of the moon—hence, the Sanskrit name of this ritual, the ‘seeing of the thousand moons’ (*sahasra-candra-darśana*)—they sprinkle blessed water from a conch shell onto a stone serving as an icon (see Figure 6). They also offer ‘125,000’ (*savā lākh*) lights that are presented in five large clay bowls in the form of handmade wicks (whose real number is typically far lower) as is customary in Newar ritual. With its dedication to the moon, this ritual seems a natural complement to the preceding *bhīmarathārohaṇa* with its focus on the sun. All the same, the moon *jamko* differs typologically from the *bhīmarathārohaṇa* and the other *jamkos* and does not include the mounting of a *ratha* and the subsequent procession. Indicative of its special status, unlike the other *jamko* rituals performed in the Buddhist fold and in stark exception to general Newar ritual practice, the moon *jamko* is strictly vegetarian and excludes the offering and consumption of alcohol as well. (Note that within the Hindu fold, for the *bhīmarathārohaṇa* ritual, there is also a tradition of banning the consumption of meat and alcohol.)

¹⁴ Pratapaditya Pal, *The Arts of Nepal: Part 2* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), p. 76. His reading of the inscription cannot be confirmed since the inscription has been concealed in the process of conserving the painting’s fabric.

¹⁵ This painting has been published numerous times, the last time lavishly in John Huntington and Dina Bangdel, *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art* (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2003, plate 6), where, however, the image has been laterally inverted.



FIGURE 5. Indralāl Mahārjan of Mikhā Bāhā, Patan, worships the moon on the occasion of seeing the thousandth full moon in his life in the evening, on Friday, 10 January 2009. He is ornamented with a white turban and assisted by his priest, Ashok Vajrācārya. The moon is worshipped through the divine personifications of the sixteen lunar phases in a fortnight. These sixteen deities are arranged as a *maṇḍala* surrounding the moon in the centre.

Source: Author's photograph.



FIGURE 6. Rudrarāja Śākya from Thaina Tol in Patan, together with his wife Sānūnānī, worships the thousandth full moon that he has seen since his birth (*sahasra-candra-darśana*). The couple stands on the roof terrace of their home facing the new full moon of the month of Bhadra (14 September 2008), as they celebrate their second *jyā jamko*. They sprinkle consecrated water from a conch shell onto the worshipped stone that represents the moon and that has also received other offerings. In accompaniment, the priest on the far right rings the bell while invoking the moon.

Source: Author's photograph.

The next *rathārohaṇa* is celebrated at the age of 88 years, 8 months and 8 days. It is known commonly as *mahārathārohaṇa*. As for the Buddhist tradition, this *jamko* is dedicated to the earth goddess Vasudhārā, who is identified with fecundity and wealth. Her worship—alongside the repeated propitiation of the *navagrahas*—serves to revitalise the celebrants and assure their material well-being. Sometimes in Buddhist ritual handbooks, the treatment of the old age rituals is introduced by Sanskrit *ślokas*, apparently to function as their scriptural basis.¹⁶ The main *śloka* for the second *jamko* (as found, for instance, in Dharmaratna Vajrācārya, *Bhīma, deva va mahārathārohaṇa pūjāvidhikriyā*, p. 29) uses *vasu* as a word designating 'eight' in a way suggestive of a special link between Vasudhārā and this *jamko* (*vasuvarśasamāpūrṇṇaṃ vasudhārārcanaṃ kuru*). The Hindu version of this *jamko* is dedicated to Viṣṇu and the eight Vasu divinities surrounding him, but I have not yet seen a

¹⁶ The *ślokas* cited in Buddhist ritual handbooks of both the Patan and Kathmandu tradition are found in the third chapter of a Newar text composed in Sanskrit with the title, *Buddhokta Śaṃsārāmaya*, which assigns some of the same *ślokas* to a text entitled *Nemasūtra Pārājikā*. I am not familiar with this text, the title of which is conspicuously absent from the list of texts microfilmed by the Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project. See Badrīratna and Ratnakāji Vajrācārya, in Lewis, 'A Modern Guide for Mahāyāna Buddhist Life-Cycle Rites', p. 28f.

Hindu source hinting at a connection between the ‘eight’ inherent to this *jamko* and the eight Vasu divinities.

The subsequent *jyā jamko*, which is celebrated at the age of 99 years, 9 months and 9 days, is known as *devarathārohana*. Among Hindu Newars, it is dedicated to Śiva, apparently assuming the form of Rudra; among Buddhists, it is dedicated to the Tantric goddess Uṣṇiṣavijayā who is worshipped—again alongside the repeated propitiation of the *navagrahas*—because of her characteristic function to prolong the life span (*āyus*) of the supplicant.

The tradition that evolved among the Buddhists of Patan deviates in important ways from this scheme. Unlike the Buddhists in Kathmandu, they observe the completion of one thousand months with a *jamko* ceremony. However, they do not treat this as an additional *jamko*, but as the second *jamko* that Buddhists normally would only celebrate with 88 years. As a consequence, it is presumed that Vasudhārā, the deity to whom the second *jamko* is dedicated, is to be worshipped on this occasion alongside the moon. However, at least nowadays, this seems to hardly happen in practice, with the result that the worship of Vasudhārā is (largely) passed over. The next *jamko*, celebrated at 88 years, is treated in Patan as the third *jamko* (which, in Kathmandu practice, is celebrated only with 99 years) and, accordingly, it is identified with Uṣṇiṣavijayā (and not with Vasudhārā, as in Kathmandu). A characteristic feature of this *jamko* is the re-entry of the elders after the procession. Using a specially erected ramp, they are made to enter an upper floor of the house from outside, together with the chariot on which he or she is seated (see Figure 7). In this way, the elders do not have to pass through the ground floor (*cheli*), which is regarded as impure and not befitting the elders’ newly assumed divine status.



FIGURE 7. The third *jyā jamko* celebrated in May 2009 for the mother of Pañcamuni Bajracharya of Dhau Bāhā in Patan as she reaches the age of 88 years, 8 months, etc. Upon the conclusion of the principal rituals and the subsequent procession, she returns to her home. She is seated upon a cart (*ratha*) and pulled up via a ramp constructed for the occasion. This allows her to enter the house without passing through the impure ground floor, which would violate the divine status attained in the course of the preceding rituals.

Source: Photograph by Thomas Kelly and reproduced with his kind permission.

Since the sequence of three *jamkos* in Patan Buddhist practice is concluded with 88 years, rather than with 99 years, the question arose of how to treat elders who reach 99 years. The solution was the addition of a fourth *jamko* that supplements the series of *bhīma-*, *deva-* and *mahārathārohaṇa* and, in this form, is unknown in other traditions. As explained below, rather than performing further rites for warding off ill fortune and prolonging the elders' life, the Buddhists of Patan have turned this fourth *jamko* into a ritual of rebirth to be performed when the elder turns 100 years old. This solution is at odds with the prescription found in some sources that a last *jamko*, named *mahādevarathārohaṇa*, is to be celebrated when the elder has reached the age of 110 years, 10 months and 10 days. Given that the age of the celebrant would be nearly 111 years, there can be no question of standard practice, though I was told by Dr. Brigitte Merz that in the 1980s, a Newar healer residing in Pokhara supposedly reached this age, and that this *jamko* was indeed performed for her. I interpret the stipulation of this *jamko* as a scholastic move aimed at completing the preceding *jamkos* of the seven, the eight and the nine by extending the numerical logic at work here (see below) to the ten, which by implication stands for 100 years and—by one mode of reckoning—a full span of life.

Buddhist Adaptations in the Performance of the Old Age Rituals

Hindu and Buddhist Newars celebrate essentially the same *jamkos*, but the performance of these rites in two distinct ritual traditions, namely the Śaiva-Śākta tradition of the Rājopādhyāya priests dominant among Hindu Newars and the Tantric Vajrayāna tradition of Newar Buddhists, translates into important differences. A pertinent example is the propitiation of the sun, moon and other planetary deities, which plays a critical role in all *jamkos*. They are prominent also in other contexts of the Newar Buddhist traditions and, accordingly, their worship has been carefully adapted to a Buddhist ritual framework. This happened notably by arranging the *graha* deities in a *maṇḍala* that is configured in a specifically Buddhist way. The most authoritative tradition known to me is recorded in the *Grahamātrkānāmadhāraṇī*, which is typically transmitted as part of the *Saptavārapāṭha*.¹⁷ There, the Buddha Śākyamuni and the three protector *bodhisattvas*, Vajrapāṇi, Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrīkumāra, surround the *navagrahas* in the centre. More precisely, they are positioned at the four gates of the *maṇḍala*, Śākyamuni in the east, Vajrapāṇi in the south, Avalokiteśvara in the west and, finally, Mañjuśrīkumāra in the north.¹⁸ However, instead of this elaborate version of the *grahamaṇḍala*, two slightly deviating models are commonly employed for the old age rituals. In the Kathmandu tradition, the planetary deities are arranged in a circle around the five protector goddesses of Vajrayāna Buddhism, the Pañcarakṣās, and the eight Uṣṇiṣa deities, Vajroṣṇiṣa, Ratnoṣṇiṣa, Padmoṣṇiṣa, Viśvoṣṇiṣa, Tejoṣṇiṣa, Dhvajoṣṇiṣa, Tikṣṇoṣṇiṣa and Chattroṣṇiṣa, who surround Śākyamuni in the *Sarvadurgatiparisodhana-maṇḍala* in the same configuration (see [Figure 8](#)).¹⁹ By contrast, an alternate model, prominent in Patan, has the

¹⁷ See, for example, Amoghavajra Vajrācārya, *Saptavāra Pustakam* (Kathmandu: Saṃkaṭā Press, 1975/76), pp. 31–46.

¹⁸ This tradition has already been recorded with the same details in Jagaddarpaṇa, *Ācāryakriyāsamuccaya*, in a section entitled *Grahamātrkāvastyanavidhi* in a facsimile edition by Lokesh Chandra (New Delhi: Sharada Rani, 1977), 427,3–433,1, to which Iain Sinclair kindly drew my attention. The *maṇḍala* is also depicted in this configuration as part of the final tableau of the Ngor-chen Vajrāvalī cycle to be discussed below.

¹⁹ An alternate set of eight Uṣṇiṣa deities, going back to the *Ācāryakriyāsamuccaya*, tends to be used for the worship of the *uṣṇiṣavijayā-maṇḍala* of the third *jamko*. In Newar handbooks (so, for instance, manuscript 2174, fol. 85v of the Asha Archives, Kathmandu), they are commonly known by their short form as Prakṛtigarbha-uṣṇiṣa, Gagana-uṣṇiṣa, Kṣitigarbha-uṣṇiṣa, Maṇigarbha-uṣṇiṣa, (Rā)joga(?)garbha-uṣṇiṣa, Amitagarbha-uṣṇiṣa, Tejogarbha-uṣṇiṣa and Dundubhisvara-uṣṇiṣa.



FIGURE 8. *Navagraha-maṇḍala* with the Pañcarakṣās, here on the occasion of Kājimān and Heramāyā Mahārjana’s *bhīmarathārohaṇa* celebrated on 8–9 September 2008. The elevated painted and framed *maṇḍala* in the centre depicts all deities by their symbols. The central circle with the Pañcarakṣās is surrounded by the set of eight Uṣṇīṣa, which also feature in the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana-maṇḍala*, viz., Vajroṣṇīṣa, Ratnoṣṇīṣa, Padmoṣṇīṣa, Viśvoṣṇīṣa, Tejoṣṇīṣa, Dhvajoṣṇīṣa, Tikṣṇoṣṇīṣa and Chatroṣṇīṣa, and in a further circle by the nine planetary deities (*navagrahas*), with the outermost circle representing the guardian deities of the eight directions (*dikpāla*). The painted *maṇḍala* is surrounded in the inner circle by five clay dishes that are identified with the Pañcarakṣās and contain the corresponding grains or pulses and other offerings. The ten dishes in the outer circle (which are likewise filled with specific substances) are identified with the nine *grahas* and the stellar constellation under which the honouree was born (*janma-nakṣatra*).

Source: Author’s photograph.

navagrahas themselves forming the overt centre of the *maṇḍala*, with the sun in the middle and the remaining eight *graha* deities surrounding the sun in the cardinal and intermediate directions just as prescribed in the *Grahamātrikānāmadhāraṇī*. However, though not represented in the layout of this *maṇḍala* as distinct deities, it seems that also in this model, the Pañcarakṣā goddesses are presumed to be located in the *maṇḍala*’s centre (just as they are in the Kathmandu tradition) and worshipped as such. This is suggested by ritual manuals and has been confirmed by Vajrācāryas questioned on this point.²⁰ Notwithstanding this inclusion of the Pañcarakṣās, it appears that in the *jaṃko* tradition of Patan, these goddesses do not play

²⁰ For instance, a handbook from a private collection in Patan reads: ‘*atha navagraha-pūjā | maṇḍalamadhye pañcarakṣā-svarūpa-pūjā ||*’.

as prominent a role as they do in Kathmandu, where they are not only depicted in the centre of the *maṇḍala*, but are also worshipped individually by the elders in the same way that the nine planetary deities and the *janma-nakṣatra* (i.e., the constellation under which the celebrant was born) are. That is, just like the planetary deities, each Pañcarakṣā goddess in the Kathmandu tradition receives a basket filled with items particular to her (a specific kind of grain or pulse, cloth in a characteristic colour, etc.) that the celebrants offer together with *pādārgḥa* once they have mounted the *ratha*. In conformity with their central position within the *maṇḍala*, the Pañcarakṣās take precedence and are worshipped in this way before the *navagrahas* are.

Because the planetary deities are an integral part of Indian astrology (*jyotiṣa*), they are common to both Hindu and Buddhist traditions in South Asia and beyond and, hence, it is only to be expected that they play an equally prominent role in Buddhist and Hindu versions of the old age rituals. Not surprisingly, the case of the aforementioned eight deities of longevity, the *aṣṭaciramjīvins*, is different. They play an important role in Hindu *jaṃkos*, where they are worshipped to ensure long life and freedom from disease (*ārogya*), but with their unmistakable identity rooted in the epics and *Purāṇas*, they have no place in a Buddhist framework. However, there is one notable exception to this, namely a tradition found among the Buddhists of Patan. They venerate the *aṣṭaciramjīvins* as part of the third *jaṃko* dedicated to the Buddhist goddess, Uṣṇiṣavijayā, who here features as the *ciramjīvins*' functional equivalent, standing like them for longevity. While, within the liturgy, they retain their original names and with them, their unambiguous Hindu identity, the deities of longevity are identified at the same time with the eight auspicious signs, the *aṣṭamaṅgalas*.²¹ This distracts from their identity and adds a layer of meaning that derives from the prominence the auspicious signs enjoy in Newar Buddhism, particularly among the Buddhists of Patan who have the lintel and sides of their house doors decorated with these signs on the occasion of *jyā jaṃko* celebrations.

Matching this accommodation of the *aṣṭaciramjīvins*, the Buddhists of Patan (but not of Kathmandu) cede a critical role to Śiva and his consort, Śakti, during the procession of the elders. In the Patan Buddhist tradition, these two principal Śaivite figures (which the handbooks refer to summarily as *śivaśakti*) are invoked routinely in their own water vessels as part of complex rituals that involve the performance of a fire ritual (*homa*). Hence, they are also set up as part of the *jaṃko* rites. When the celebrants mount their *rathas* and are conveyed around town, they grasp the vessels of these deities (the man that of Śiva and marked blue, his wife that of Śakti and marked red). This clearly serves to enact their identification with these two deities. Accordingly, if the celebrants are widowed, they carry in addition to their own vessel also the second vessel, which serves to evoke the presence of their predeceased partner. It is striking to see that the elders in an otherwise unambiguously Buddhist ritual are equated with Śiva and his Śakti. Newar interlocutors tend to explain this by equating Śiva and Śakti with Lokeśvara and Tārā,²² or Cakrasaṃvara and Vajradevī, but this does not settle the matter.

²¹ The handbook from a private collection in Patan I consulted aligned the eight auspicious signs (*aṣṭamaṅgala*) and the *aṣṭaciramjīvins* in the following way: Aśvatthāman: endless knot (*śrīvatsa*); Bali: lotus flower (*punḍarīka*); Vyāsa: royal banner (*dhvaja*); Mārkaṇḍa: water vase (*kalaśa*); Kṛpācārya: white yak-tail whisk (*śvetacāmara*); Paraśurāma: fish (*matsya*); Hanumāna: honorific parasol (*chattra*); and Vibhiṣaṇa: conch shell (*śaṅkha*). Note that Hanumāna and Mārkaṇḍa have traded places in this scheme and that Kṛpa is addressed as Kṛpācārya.

²² The association of Śiva with Avalokiteśvara is a prominent theme in Mahāyāna literature. It is already attested to in the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*, where Avalokiteśvara emanates Maheśvara from his forehead. See P.L. Vaidya (ed.), *Mahāyāna-sūtra-saṅgrahaḥ 1* (Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute, 1961), p. 265. Avalokiteśvara later prophesies that Maheśvara will eventually become a Buddha called Bhasmeśvara (*Ibid.*, p. 304), a theme that is repeated in the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha*. See K. Horiuchi (ed.), *Shōe Kongōchōkyō no Kenkyū, Bonpon Kōteihei Benzōkan Tashihō, Vols. 1 & 2* (Kōyasan University: Mikkyō Bunka Kenkyūjo, 1983), Vol. 1, p. 349, § 732.

One way to account for the equation with Śiva and Śakti during the *yātrā* is to link the deification and *yātrā* to the celebrant's journey in the beyond, which, following this logic, would take them to the heavenly realm of Śiva and Śakti. However, such an interpretation (which is sometimes advanced by Hindu priests, as I explain below) is at odds with the common Buddhist aspiration to be reborn in a Buddhist pure heavenly realm such as Sukhāvati. Complicating matters, to my knowledge, the tradition of holding the Śiva and Śakti flasks during the procession does not feature in the *jamkos* performed in the Hindu fold. Instead, Hindu Newars may hold their horoscope when they are seated on their conveyance. It is thus problematic to explain the special role of the Śiva and Śakti vessels in the Buddhist tradition of Patan as a straightforward import of a Hindu ritual element. Rather, this seems to be the result of a complex process of borrowing and adaptation that is difficult to unravel.

A Functionalistic Explanation of the Old Age Rituals

As noted above, one way to look at the *vyā jamkos* is as special birthday rituals. Like these rituals, they incorporate the appeasement of the planetary deities, and, in a Hindu context, the propitiation of the eight deities of longevity, with the purpose of warding off bad fortune and ensuring good health and long life. However, unlike ordinary birthdays, the age for the *jamko*'s celebration does not result from the common anniversary of the day of birth, but is occasioned by the completion of a full span of life according to a particular mode of computation that differs from *jamko* to *jamko*. In order to ensure that he or she does not succumb to death now that a full span has been exhausted, protective rituals are needed that ensure the celebrant's continued good health and well-being beyond this critical threshold. It follows that the focus of the *vyā jamko* rites is not on the completion of the given period, but on the time ahead. The same holds good for ordinary birthdays, which, among the Newars, are not marked by joyous social gatherings and celebrations, but merely serve as an occasion for performing protective rituals. This orientation towards the future, rather than the past, is one of the principal differences between the *vyā jamko* rites and the way special birthdays, such as the seventieth birthday, are celebrated in Western societies. Whereas these round birthdays serve as occasions to look back upon the jubilarian's life and celebrate its achievements, the *jamkos*' main concern is the welfare of the celebrant in the remaining years of his or her life and, arguably, in the beyond. Newar *jamkos* and such round birthdays in the West both serve as an opportunity to honour the celebrant, but their underlying thrust could hardly be more different.

The logic behind the observance of the old age rituals is particularly obvious in the case of the *jamko* of the thousand full moons. A full span of time, here defined as 1,000 months, draws to its close. The thousandth full moon marks the completion of this period and the passage into an uncertain phase beyond. The propitiation of the moon described above is to protect the celebrated elders and ensure that they may continue to live happily beyond the 1,000 months they have now lived for.

The same logic also underlies another old age ritual that, while not observed by the Newars, is attested to widely in Indic sources and performed in many parts of India even today. This rite is observed when one has completed 60 years (*ṣaṣṭyabdapūrti*). According to Indic astrology, there are 60 *saṃvatsaras*, that is, specifically named years that form a complete set, a *br̥haspati-saṃvatsara-cakra*.²³ Hence, once someone has lived for 60 years, he or she will have passed through each and every *saṃvatsara*, and in this way will have

²³ Cf. Kropf, 'Rituelle Traditionen der Planetengottheiten im Kathmandal', p. 89.

completed an entire cycle. Biologically speaking, 60 years is, at least nowadays, not a particularly critical age, but because of the perceived completion of an entire set of *saṃvatsaras*, the need is again seen to protect the elder at this crucial juncture and to ensure that he or she continues to live in good health beyond this point.

Though less obvious, the same logic is also operative in the case of the first *ḡyā jaṃko*, the *bhīmarathārohaṇa*. Again a complete span of time comes to its end. Here, the span of time is configured by the number seven, which, as in the seven days of the week, forms a complete set according to Indic reckoning. The celebrant is 7 decades, 7 years, 7 months and 7 days old. Following the underlying logic, this, rather than a mere 70 years, truly completes seven decades. The same logic is at work in other contexts. For instance, according to a prominent Tibetan tradition, the so-called 3-year retreat, an important form of Vajrayāna practice, lasts in fact 3 years, 3 months and 3 days. When the celebrant passes beyond the seventh day of the seventh month of the seventh year of the seventh decade, he enters the realm of the inauspicious eight. It is regarded as inauspicious because it exceeds the whole set of seven, just as the number thirteen is feared as ill-omened in the West because it goes beyond the perfect dozen. Thus, the first *ḡyā jaṃko* is occasioned by the celebrant's completion of seven 'extended' decades and the entry into the potentially calamitous eighth decade. This popular explanation cannot be found in the ritual manuals because their concern is only the correct performance of rituals and not their interpretation. However, the entry of *bhīmarathī* in Rādhākānta's Sanskrit lexicographical work, the *Śabdakalpadruma*, supports the foregoing. It adduces another lexicographical work entitled *Śabdamaḡā*, which has it that this term refers to the terrible (*bhīma*) night (*rathī* > *rātri*) because it marks the exceedingly precarious transition beyond the seventh day of the seventh month of the seventy-seventh year.²⁴ While this explanation is linguistically flawed—*rathī* cannot be derived from *rātri*²⁵—it works as a *nirukti* (which is not a linguistic etymology) and correctly captures the association of *bhīmaratha* with the completion of seven 'extended' decades and the perceived danger of living beyond this. The term *bhīmaratha-śānti*, by which a version of this ritual is known among Tamils (see below), fits this explanation. It characterises this ceremony as a rite of appeasement (*śānti*) that wards off the potentially calamitous consequences associated with passing beyond the realm of the 'seven' and crossing the threshold of the 'eight'. Similarly, the *ṣaṣṡyabdapūrti* (or a specific version thereof) is also known as *ṣaṣṡyabdapūrti-ugraratha-śānti*, or simply as *ugraratha-śānti*.

The completion of the eighth, ninth and tenth 'extended' decades are likewise marked by *jaṃkos*, that is, when a person turns 88 years, etc., 99 years, etc., and 110 years, etc. Particularly important is the *jaṃko* celebrated when an elder reaches 99 years, 9 months and 9 days, because she (or he, which is less commonly the case) is then nearly 100 years old. One hundred years constitute, according to yet another, particularly prominent way of reckoning, a full span of life. Because this age, in particular, is associated with the exhaustion of the life

²⁴ Rādhākānta, *Śabdakalpadruma* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, rpr. 1961), Vol. 3, p. 513: 'saptasaptatīke varṣe saptame māsi saptamī / rātrir bhīmarathī nāma narāṇaṃ duratikramā'. Rādhākānta adduces another text, entitled *Vaidyaka*, under the entry for *bhīmarathī*. It offers a variant of this *śloka*, which forms part of the citation adduced below in n. 33.

²⁵ Rādhākānta's explanation of the term *bhīmaratha* is also problematic insofar as the ritual is frequently known as *bhīmarathārohaṇa*, i.e., the mounting of the Bhīma vehicle. This term suggests that *bhīma* is not to be taken as an adjective, but, rather, as a name, possibly an epithet of the 'owner' of the vehicle (*ratha*)—i.e., that *bhīmaratha* is a *tatpuruṣa* and not as a *karmadhāraya*. Since the vehicle (*ratha*) is identified with the sun and accordingly adorned with horses, it ought to be of the sun. However, to my knowledge, *bhīma* does not function as an epithet for the sun, though given the ferocious heat of the Indian summer sun, its characterisation in such terms would not be implausible.

force, the Buddhists of Patan have, as mentioned above, come up with an ingenious alternative to the *jamko* rites normally performed at this juncture. Instead of the mere performance of apotropaic, life-prolonging rites, they celebrate the fourth *jamko* only after the celebrant has reached 100 years and then enact the centenarian's rebirth. To this end, the elder is placed in a huge earthenware pot fabricated for the occasion, which functions as the uterus. After ritualising the conception and embryonic phase, a hole is broken into the pot. The celebrant is then taken out through this hole, thereby enacting her (or his) delivery. Subsequently, the standard set of rites of passage (*samskāra*) is performed for the elder. It is commonly held that these rites effect a real rejuvenation of the centenarian, who will start to grow teeth and black hair again.

This rebirthing ritual has not been invented from scratch, but is modelled on the consecration of deities. At such a rebirthing ritual (performed in March 2003 for Dhālānī Māhārjana of Dhalache in Patan), the model was, according to one of the participating priests from Bhimche Bāhā, the re-consecration performed annually for Buṅgadyaḥ (i.e., the Karuṅāmaya deity also known as Rāto Matsyendranātha). While the re-consecration of Buṅgadyaḥ is preceded by a de-consecration ritual with unmistakable mortuary overtones—the divine essence is extracted from the icon and temporarily stored in a water vessel so as to allow for the icon's repair—the rebirthing ritual is not preceded by the ritual enactment of death. This would be considered highly inauspicious and not in accord with the *jamko*'s life-affirming orientation. Because the rebirthing rites are carried out in the same way as they would be for the consecration of Buddha images and other icons, they not only return the reborn elder to the state of full adulthood, but they also deify her (or him) in no uncertain terms. The rebirthing ritual is thus both a particularly elaborate ceremony to deify the elder and an ingenious solution to the problem of how the elder may survive after his or her span of life has come to an end. It accords with the latter function of the rebirthing rite that it cannot, according to various informants, be performed right after the elder has turned 99 years and 9 months and 9 days, but only after the threshold of 100 years has been reached.

Even though the *gyā jamko* rites are occasioned by the perceived need to ward off death and prolong life, there is also the perception that they serve to prepare the celebrant for the passage beyond this life. This is not made explicit in the ritual handbooks, which are only concerned with providing instructions, but it is a perspective Hindu and Buddhist priests and other Newar observers articulate when they point to the Tantric deification that assimilates the elders to a deity—in a Hindu context, Śiva or Viṣṇu, and their female counterparts—and thereby makes them fit to enter the heavenly realm of that deity (*devaloka*) after their death. In support of this interpretation, my conversation partners have cited the (supposed) funerary practice of carrying the dead to the cremation ground on a bier made (partly) out of the wood of the conveyance (*ratha*) used for the *jamko* procession.²⁶ The corpse is reportedly placed on the pyre together with the bier upon which it rests and is cremated together with it. This (supposed) funerary use of the *ratha* mirrors its mounting in the *jamko* ritual, when the elders act out their identification with the deity in question. It allows the elders to resume their divine identity in death and ride upon the *ratha* to the given divine world (*devaloka*) in the beyond. Similarly, it is claimed that the elders' corpses may be draped in the special *jamko* shawl bestowed upon them as part of the deification rites during the *jamko* ceremony. Again it is understood that the shawl connects them to the divine status assumed as part of the *jamko* ritual and thereby facilitates their assumption of the fitting heavenly realm. While it makes

²⁶ I have not been able to verify a single case where the *jamko*'s *ratha* was stored and then used for fabricating the funerary bier. It seems that this is not common practice. Whatever the facticity of these claims, what matters here is that the deification of the elders is—not unreasonably—linked to their heavenly ascent in the beyond.

perfect sense in a Hindu context to view the deification of the elders as a strategy to assimilate them ontologically to a given deity, and hence the realm (*devaloka*) that the deity stands for in the beyond, this is less compelling from a Buddhist perspective, in which the elders aspire to be reborn in Sukhāvati, that is, the pure Buddha land over which Amitābha presides, a realm free from suffering that is the ideal environment for the eventual attainment of *nirvāṇa*. Rather than the ritual identification with a given deity, it is the accumulation of merit and the according aspiration that allow for access to Sukhāvati upon death.

In support of viewing the *ḥjā jamko* as a rite that not only aims to ward off death, but also anticipates it as an inevitable reality, it can also be pointed out that married elders undergo their *jamko* together, irrespective of the wife's age. If the mounting of the *ratha* and the subsequent procession around the town are viewed as an enactment of the couple's joint ascent to a divine world in the beyond, then the wife's participation in the ritual follows because it is her duty to stand by the side of her husband, both here and in the beyond (*sahadharmitva*)—a principle that finds its most extreme expression in the custom of 'widow burning', where the 'good woman' (*satī*) ascends the funerary pyre of her husband, on one count in order to be cremated with him and hence be by his side in the beyond.

Even though the elders' deification may be viewed as preconfiguring their ascent to heaven in the beyond, the *jamko* rite is clearly not mortuary in character. It is performed before death and does not address biological death and a corpse. There is no sense of ritual pollution and the inauspiciousness of death, sentiments that are pervasive in an Indic context. Moreover, there is nothing in the practice of the *jamkos* that could compare to the *śrāddha* rites with the offering of rice balls (*piṇḍa*) that feed the deceased and help them to gain and maintain a new body in the beyond. Accordingly, in *jamko* rituals, there is no inversion of values as in death rites, when, for instance, offerings are made with the left rather than with the right hand, or when the sacred thread is worn over the right rather than the left shoulder.²⁷ Nor is the *jamko* in any way similar to mortuary rites performed before biological death, such as the funerary rites that renunciators carry out for themselves as part of their renunciatory *samnyāsa* ritual, in order to mark their irreversible departure from society.²⁸ Rather than being mortuary in character, the *jamko*'s primary agenda is to protect the elders against ill-fortune, sickness and death, to revitalise them and, thereby, to bind them to this life. This does not only happen by way of the apotropaic and propitiatory rituals mentioned so far, but also by way of numerous additional elements.

There is a further dimension of the old age rituals that has gone unmentioned so far, but warrants consideration here, namely the presence of ritual elements taken over from the wedding ritual. This does not concern such acts as mounting a stone or taking the seven auspicious steps that are performed also as part of other *samśkāras*; rather, this is about rites that are specific to the wedding ritual, notably the joint circumambulation of the fire by the elderly couple and their sharing of a meal from a single plate (*thāybhū*) upon conclusion of the procession. These elements are characteristic of the wedding rituals undergone by Newars and their suggestive nature is not lost upon the celebrants and other participants. However, though not insignificant, these elements do not play as prominent a role as they may in the *bhimarathaśānti* (and *ṣaṣṭyabdāpūrti*?) performed outside Nepal (see n. 29), where the re-affirmation of the wedding bond can become a principal agenda. Rather, the presence of these

²⁷ See Klaus-Werner Müller, *Das brahmanische Totenritual nach der Antyeṣṭipadhati des Nārāyaṇabhaṭṭa* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1992), p. 86.

²⁸ See Joachim Sprockhoff, 'Die Alten im alten Indien. Ein Versuch nach brahmanischen Quellen', in *Saeculum*, Vol. 30 (1979), pp. 374–433.

elements speaks to the accretive nature of the Newar old age rituals and to their social dimension, but it would go too far to interpret these rituals in the light of these elements.

In this paper, I treat the old age rituals from the perspective of the priests and the pertinent ritual literature. This also informs my treatment of the function of these rituals and entails that I pay less attention to the social aspects that lie outside the scripted performance of the rituals. They serve as important occasions to unite the extended family across generations and connect to wedded daughters and their families. Moreover, the procession of the elders through the town and the ritual feast (*bhavya*) served afterwards to hundreds of guests transform the old age rituals into public events that enhance the prestige, standing and honour (*izzat*) not only of the celebrants, but also of their sons and grandsons, who sponsor the ritual, and of the family as a whole. Accordingly, as a mark of respect, guests offer to both the celebrants and to the principal family members the ceremonial dish of *sagun* (which consists of a small charred fish, a boiled duck egg and rice liquor and this is offered with curd that is applied to the temple as a blessing) and, for males, turbans. Befitting their public character, nowadays these rites serve the Newars also as an occasion to enact and express their identity in a situation where they find themselves increasingly marginalised in their traditional homeland. Hence, I relate the *jamko* rites' current popularity not only to gains in longevity, but also to the steady growth of Newar communalism over the last decades. While a treatment of these social aspects would go beyond the confines of this paper, it is important to register that, for most participants, these aspects of the old age rituals stand in the foreground, while little attention is paid to the intricacies of the priestly rituals and the functions they encode.

On the Origins of the Old Age Rituals

Even though the sequence of old age rituals described here is unique to the Newars, it is clear that the *gyā jamkos* did not originate in isolation, but have to be viewed as part of a larger Indic tradition of performing old age rituals.²⁹ Here, space suffices only to touch upon the roots and origins of the Newar old age rituals. To start with, the ritual of the thousand moons is attested to in a few, comparatively late (from the second half of the first millennium?) *grhyasūtras* (which treat domestic rituals and attach themselves to the *Vedas*), namely the *Āgniveśya-grhyasūtra* (2.4.6), the *Bodhāyaniya-grhyaśeṣasūtra* (1.24) and the *Vaikhānāsa-grhyasūtra* (3.21). Likewise, it also features in the *Skandapurāṇa* (*Vaiṣṇavakhaṇḍa*: *Ayodhyāmāhātmya*, third *adhya*). In these works, the rite is called 'hundred lustrations' (*śatābhiṣeka*). This refers to the sanctification of the elders by showering them with blessed water. In addition to the propitiation of the moon, the *grhyasūtras* also prescribe that the elders be taken on a procession around their village. In numerous Hindu communities in Nepal and elsewhere on the subcontinent, the ritual of 'eighty-four' (Hindi: *caurāsī*; Sanskrit *caturāśīti*) is still performed when reaching 84 years and having lived 1,000 months. For instance, the *Vaikhānasas* of Tamil Nadu observe this ritual, though apparently usually in a form that does not include the mounting of the *ratha* and the subsequent procession.³⁰ The *grhyasūtras* indicate that the *śatābhiṣeka* ritual may be observed not only when completing 1,000 months,

²⁹ A brief and incomplete treatment of Indic old age rituals and their background can be found in Chintaharan Chakravarti, 'Propitiatory Rites for Warding Off the Evils of Old Age', in S.M. Katre and P.K. Gode (eds), *A Volume of Eastern and Indian Studies: Presented to Frederick William Thomas, on his 72nd Birth-day, 21st March 1939* (Bombay: Karnatak Publishing House, 1939), pp. 43–5.

³⁰ I am grateful to Ute Huesken for sharing her images and notes of a performance of the thousand moon ritual among the *Vaikhānasas* of Tamil Nadu in Singaperumal in January 2002.

but also when reaching 100 years. This attests to the principle that there are several old age rituals, depending upon the mode of computation.

Outside the fold of *dharmasāstra* and *Purāṇic* literature, there is also testimony to a ritual that matches the first Newar *jamko*, the *bhīmarathārohaṇa*.³¹ This is the *bhīmarathasānti* ritual observed among Tamil Brahmins (such as the Iyer community). It is performed upon the completion of the seventieth or seventy-fifth year, and not when reaching 77 years, 7 months and 7 days, as among the Newars. At least nowadays, the performance of this ritual seems to be rare and the exception rather than the rule (as it is among the Newars). There are further significant differences. Most importantly, it seems that the elders are not deified as in Newar practice and, accordingly, they do not mount a chariot. Moreover, in Tamil practice (cf. n. 31), wedding motives are apparently much more prominent than in the *vyā jamko* ceremonies. Notwithstanding these differences, the Newar and Tamil *bhīmaratha* ritual share a common core that includes the ritual ablution of the elders, and apparently also the appeasement of the planetary deities.

Beyond the fold of Newar and Tamil culture, there is the term *bhīmarathī* ('someone characterised by the *bhīmaratha*') in Bangla parlance. There, this term is employed to refer to someone who has reached the age of 77 years, 7 months and 7 days, with the implicit understanding that he or she has started to become senile.³² This shade of meaning is already attested to in the aforementioned *Śabdakalpadruma*, which Rādhākānta compiled in the nineteenth century in Bengal. After identifying the term *bhīmarathī* with the seventh night (*rātri*) of the seventh month in the seventy-seventh year (cf. n. 23), the work adduced as *Vaidyaka* sets forth that the difficulty of crossing this threshold is rewarded handsomely by the effortless accumulation of religious merit afterwards. Thus, each day lived beyond that threshold is likened to a sacrifice with a presentation (*dakṣiṇā*) of hundreds of pieces of gold. Moreover, ordinary walking becomes circumambulating Viṣṇu, babbling becomes reciting mantras, sleeping becomes meditating, and eating ordinary food amounts to the consumption of heavenly nectar.³³ There is clearly no such implication in the celebration of the Newar *bhīmarathārohaṇa* and its perceived consequences. On the contrary, the Newars undergoing the *bhīmaratha* rite are revered and even deified, and there is no notion that their senses might be impaired by old age. Hence, I conjecture that the term *bhīmarathī* assumed its particular meaning in Bangla parlance (which Rādhākānta reproduces in his *Śabdakalpadruma*, and which informs Pratapaditya. Pal's mistaken understanding of the Newar rite³⁴) because knowledge of the ritual tradition underlying this term had been lost earlier, or had never been current in the first place. In the latter case, we would have to presume that the term entered the Bangla language from outside and was adapted without due knowledge of the original ritual context.

³¹ For a spectacular example, see website reports of the *bhīmarathasānti* that Sathya Sai Baba performed for 275 couples in one grand ceremony on 10 February 2005. The official account focuses on the re-enactment of the wedding rites performed as part of the *bhīmarathasānti*. These included the tying of the *maṅgalasūtra* and the mutual garlanding by the spouses [<http://www.saibaba.ws/reports/2005/bheemarathashanthi.htm>, accessed 6 Oct. 2013].

³² See Lawrence Cohen, *No Ageing in India. Alzheimer's, the Bad Family, and Other Modern Things* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. 157.

³³ Rādhākānta, *Śabdakalpadruma*, Vol. 3, p. 513: 'saptasaptatīvarṣāṇām saptame māsi saptamī / rātrir bhīmarathī nāma nārāṇām atidustarā // tām atītya naro yo 'sau dināni yāni jīvati / kratubhis tāni tulyāni suvarṇasatadakṣiṇaiḥ // gatīḥ pradakṣiṇam viṣṇor jalpanam mantrabhāṣaṇam / dhyānam nidrā sudhā cānnaṃ bhīmarathyāḥ phalaśrutīḥ'.

³⁴ In his article, 'The Bhīmaratha Rite and Nepali Art', Pal, who hails from Bengal, claims that this rite marks the entry into 'the realm of senility', where the elders 'are no longer responsible for their actions' (p. 176), thus projecting an inappropriate Bangla understanding of *bhīmaratha* upon his Nepalese material.

In addition to the Tamil instances and Bangla traces of a *bhīmaratha* tradition, there is another old age ritual outside the fold of the Newars that, by its designation, connects to the *bhīmaratha* rite, namely the aforementioned *ugraratha-śānti*, performed upon the completion of 60 years. (Similarly to *bhīma*, meaning ‘fearful’, *ugra* means ‘fierce’, so that the terms *bhīmaratha* and *ugraratha* closely correspond to each other.) Though the rite occasioned by this age is normally known simply as ‘completion of 60 years’ (*śaṣṭyabdapūrti*)—under this name, it is popular throughout India—the term *ugraratha-śānti* is also well attested and already occurs in *Baudhāyanaḡṛhyaśeṣasūtra* V. 8. Remarkably, the Newars themselves do not observe this rite, though it is not unknown and there is some memory of how the Rana prime minister, Chandra Shumshere (ruled 1901–29), had his sixtieth birthday lavishly celebrated with an *ugraratha* ceremony that involved a grand procession around Kathmandu.

As for the two *ḡyā jaṃkos* celebrated at 88 and 99 years of age, there is only a mention in the *ḡṛhyasūtras* that the *śatābhiṣeka* ritual may also be observed when reaching 100 years. It seems likely, therefore, that these *jaṃkos* are a local Newari innovation that take the *bhīmaratha* celebrated at 77 as their starting point and build upon the logic of this rite by enacting a similar old age ritual after every expanded decade (11 years, 11 months, etc.). In other words, after marking the completion of the expanded seven decades with the *bhīmaratha*, the completion of each further decade gives likewise occasion for a *jaṃko* performance. The resultant sequence of *jaṃkos* celebrated at 77, 88 and 99 years of age—as mentioned above, the *jaṃko* at 110 years is basically a theoretical construct arrived at by computing ten extended decades—works particularly well in a Buddhist context where these three *jaṃkos* are identified with three different *dhāraṇī* goddesses, namely Grahamātrkā, Vasudhārā and Uṣṇiṣavijayā. These three goddesses occur as a set in the aforementioned *Ācāryakriyāsamuccaya* authored by Jagaddarpaṇa in Nepal, possibly in the thirteenth century. There, their propitiation is taught in the same sequence with the same functions that they reportedly also serve when they feature in the *jaṃko* rituals:

To appease the harm from planets, to do away with the suffering from poverty, and to increase the life span of those who have only a short span left, is proclaimed as the blessing brought about (respectively) by three *maṇḡalas* (viz. the *maṇḡalas* of Grahamātrkā, Vasudhārā and Uṣṇiṣavijayā).³⁵

Together with the *Pañcarakṣā-maṇḡala* (with Mahāpratisarā in the centre), these three *maṇḡalas* are also depicted in the final (‘fourteenth’) tableau of the Ngor-chen cycle that was commissioned by the Śākya master Ngor chen Kun dga’ bzang po (1382–1456) to render the *maṇḡalas* of Abhayākaragupta’s *Vajrāvalī*. More precisely, in the tableau, which is organised into four quarters, the *Pañcarakṣā-maṇḡala* features in the upper left quarter, the *maṇḡala* of Grahamātrkā in the quarter below, and the *maṇḡalas* of Vasudhārā and Uṣṇiṣavijayā, respectively, in the upper and lower quarters on the right.³⁶ Unlike the *Pañcarakṣā-maṇḡala*, which is the eighteenth of the 26 *maṇḡalas* of Abhayākaragupta’s *Vajrāvalī* cycle, the three other *maṇḡalas* do not form part of that original cycle, but have been added on. The Newars played an important role in the transmission of the *Vajrāvalī* to Ngor chen Kun dga’ bzang po, and the addition of the three *maṇḡalas* to the Ngor-chen cycle may well be a result of Newar

³⁵ *Ācāryakriyāsamuccaya* 427,3f: ‘*grahādidōṣopaśamāya caiva dāridryaduḡkḡhapravināśanāya / alpāyusāṃ cāyurvivṛddhihetos trimaṇḡalaih svastyayanaṃ praśastaṃ //*’ (amending the *c-pada* to read *cāyurvivṛddhihetos* would corrupt the meter).

³⁶ See Marylin Rhie, Robert Thurman and John Taylor, *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet* (New York: Tibet House New York, 1996), Plate 73, pp. 226–9.

influence. If so, it confirms the particular importance these *maṅḍalas* held even then in the Newar tradition, as already borne out by their inclusion in the *Ācāryakriyāsamuccaya*. (Note that in this text, the three *dhāraṇī maṅḍalas* feature apart from the *Vajrāvalī*, which Jagaddarpaṇa incorporates in full in an earlier section of his ritual compendium.)

It is striking that the Buddhist sequence of old age rituals reproduces the cult of the three *dhāraṇī* deities already taught in the *Ācāryakriyāsamuccaya* in unison as a means to ward off ill-fortune, assure material well-being and extend the life span, and it is also significant that the worship of these *dhāraṇī* deities is combined with the worship of the five Pañcarakṣā goddesses, and in this way mirrors the final tableau of the Ngor-chen cycle. As a result, it is clear that the Buddhist sequence of old age rituals is deeply rooted in the Buddhist tradition and unmistakable as to its identity. It is even conceivable that the tripartite structure of old age rituals with *jamkos* at 77, 88 and 99 (which is also observed in a Hindu context) owes its practice to the threefold scheme of *dhāraṇī* goddess worship. For, while the addition of the second and third *jamko* dedicated to Vasudhārā and Uṣṇiṣavijayā make perfect sense within Buddhism, their role and place is less certain in the Hindu fold. Also note that the second and third *jamkos* have, to my knowledge, no equivalent in the Brahmanical traditions outside Nepal.

On the other hand, the names of the *gyā jamkos*, viz. *bhīma-*, *mahā-* and *devarathārohaṇa*, which are used in both traditions alike, are suggestive of a Hindu background. Here, one might also point to the role Śiva and his Śakti and—less conspicuously—the *aṣṭaciramjīvins* play in the old age ceremonies of the Buddhists of Patan. In truth, it is impossible to locate the origins of the old age ceremonies exclusively in either the Hindu or Buddhist sphere. Rather, even while kept strictly apart by their performance in distinct ritual traditions, with the invocation of distinct deities, etc., they evolved in tandem in close proximity and are so closely intertwined that the search for their precise origins in a single tradition would be ill-conceived. Instead, we should engage them as multi-layered and accretive ritual complexes that have incorporated elements from different ritual traditions in order to assume their distinct forms.

In some ways exceptional, however, is the rite of ‘seeing the thousandth full moon’ (*sahasra-candra-darśana*). As we have seen, this ritual is prescribed in the *smārta* tradition of the late *gr̥hyasūtra* literature, and it is observed by communities in Nepal and India who do not perform any of the other *jamko* rites. Indicative of its special status, among Newar Buddhists only those of Patan perform this rite routinely. They do so while observing a complete ban on any forms of meat and alcohol. This extends to the ritual meal (Newari: *thāybhū*) partaken by the honourees afterwards, and also to the festive meal (Newari: *bhvay*) served to the participants and guests. It even includes the aforementioned ceremonial good luck offering, the *sagun*. It may consist of a banana (instead of charred fish), a round sweetmeat (instead of an egg) and milk (instead of rice liquor). By contrast, on the occasion of the other *jamkos*, the use of meat and alcohol during the ritual is taken for granted, and so is their ritual consumption subsequently as part of the *sagun* offering, the *thāybhū* and the concluding festive meal. Indeed, befitting the Tantric framework in which they are performed, the use of alcohol and meat is integral to Newar life-cycle rituals generally. Therefore, the moon *jamko* (as observed in the Patan Buddhist tradition) stands out in stark contrast by being bounded by notions of ritual purity taken over from the *smārta* tradition of the *gr̥hyasūtras*. This bears out that this old age ritual, even while performed within the Buddhist tradition, is clearly rooted in the Brahmanical tradition and even Brahmanical in character in a way the other *jamkos*, with their incorporation of the *dhāraṇī* tradition of Grahamātrkā, Vasudhārā and Uṣṇiṣavijayā, are decidedly not.

Whatever the precise details of the origins and development of the Newar old age rituals may be, they attest, like the divine marriage of the *ihī* ritual mentioned at the beginning of this

paper, to the freedom and creativity with which the Newar tradition, both in the Buddhist and Hindu folds, has worked with Indic ritual elements of divergent origins—almost as if using them as a toolbox—in order to fashion new rituals, or reshape received rituals, as happened in the case of the ordination ceremony.³⁷ The scope for innovation is particularly evident in the addition of the rebirth ritual in the Buddhist tradition of Patan in response to the aforementioned dilemma that the third (and originally final) *jamko* of Uṣṇīṣavijayā came to be celebrated already with 88, and not, as originally the case, with 99 years. Rather than stifling change, rituals have proved remarkably malleable in the hands of the Newars. This malleability has allowed them to adapt—rather than challenge—the overarching ritual systems inherited from the Indic world beyond Nepal to the specific needs and particularities of their distinct culture. Though striking in the forms this has taken, this is not an exceptional case, but characteristic of the way in which local cultures have negotiated their place within the larger orbit of South Asian civilisation, and how they continue to do so.

³⁷ Cf. von Rospatt, ‘The Transformation of the Monastic Ordination (*Pravrajyā*) into a Rite of Passage in Newar Buddhism’, pp. 199–234.